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ABSTRACT

This research discusses Mexico's maquiladora industry, its employees (mostly women), and how the working conditions and the living environment affect worker health. The paper also explores how the employers, mostly U.S.-owned companies, deny responsibility for worker health, safety, and well-being. This research examines how the continued growth of the maquila industry exerts pressure on the existing infrastructure that is already providing insufficient services. Statistical data are included where appropriate to support the information presented and provide opportunities for further research for high school students. (EH)

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Angela L. Rodríguez

Maquiladora: An update from the border.

Newcomer High School

Fulbright-Hays Summer Seminar
Mexico 1994

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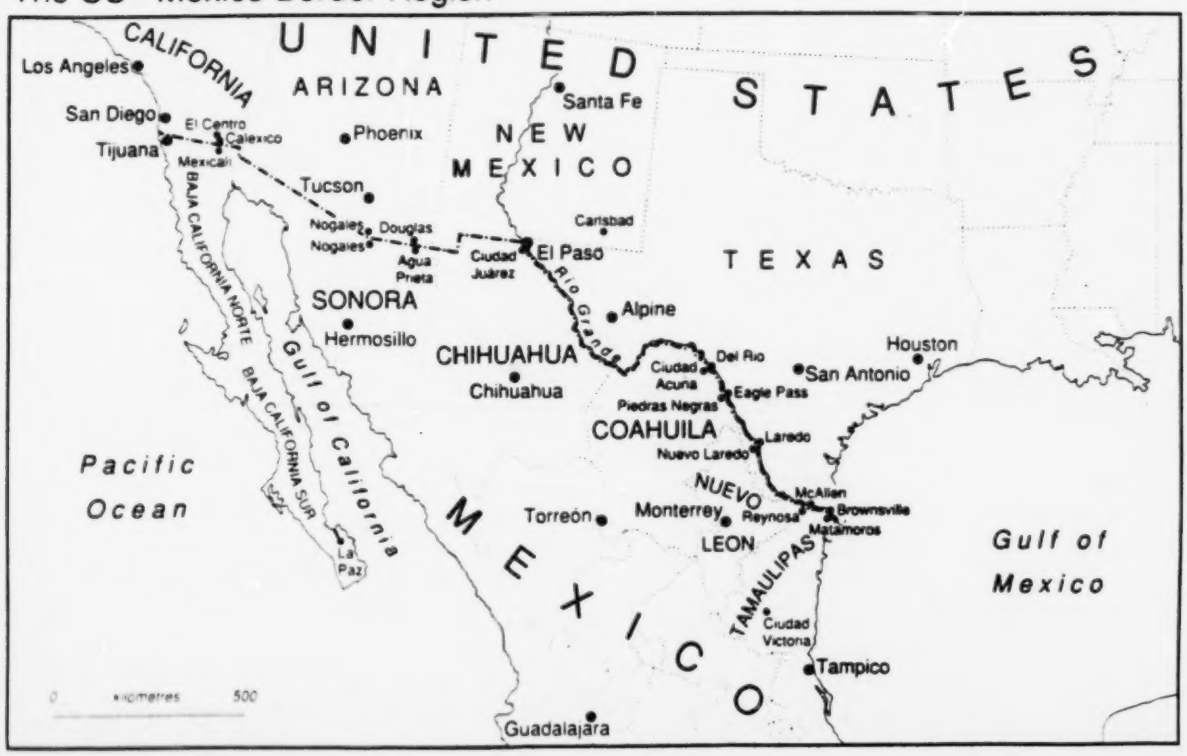
Maquiladora Industry: An update from the border

Angela L. Rodríguez
November 18, 1994
Summer Fulbright-Hays – México

The US - Mexico Border Region



"There is little joy along the boundary where Third and First Worlds meet."
-William Langewiesche from Traveler's Tales - Mexico

My few days in El Paso, Texas this summer as a summer Fulbright-Hays participant left a big impression in my mind. Staying on the University of Texas campus on the U.S. side of the Rio Grande river is where I began thinking and reading about the city on the other side -- Ciudad Juarez. One of the speakers, Dr. Richard Bath, a political science professor gave a shocking introduction to the environmental concerns of this border region. Specifically, I was interested to learn more about the big smoke stacks I saw across the river and what kind of industry was polluting the skies and the waters on both sides. As I read I found out that those stacks are part of the Maquiladora Industry which grew up in the 1960s as a way of bringing more dollars into the Mexican economy. Like the present day NAFTA the maquiladora industry is putting dollars not into the pockets of Mexicans but into the coffers of the U.S. companies who have set up shop there.

As I began to do further research for this article at Stanford University and the University of California at Berkeley, I realized that the scope of this project didn't give me the time to investigate an original question. The central theme of my inquiry then became to take a closer look at the history of the maquila industry, its employees, mostly women, and how the working conditions they endure and the environment they live in affects their health and how their employers, mostly U.S. owned companies deny responsibility for their health, safety and well being. Secondly, I examine how the continued growth of the maquila industry exerts pressure on the existing infrastructure that is already providing insufficient services. I have included statistical data where appropriate to support the information gathered here and to help in presenting this information to high school History or Civics students.

The Mexican Border Industrial Program began in 1965 as a way for Mexico to build up its economy by assembling American products and shipping them back to the States to be sold. Attractive to U.S. companies who could take advantage of cheap labor (the average Mexican maquila worker makes .57 per hour) services and operations and geographic benefit for transportation of goods and communications. Originally begun with 12 factories today there are over 2000 U.S. and other foreign owned companies sprinkled along the border. Over half a million Mexicans work in the maquilas that are 68% U.S. owned. For example, General Electric has expanded operations in México and has 8 plants there employing over 8,500 Mexicans.(1) Today the Mexican Border Industrial Program looks a little different. To make the picture more bleak, the nature of what products are processed south of the border has also changed since the program's inception.

Today automobile assembly and electronic circuitry processing have replaced the textile industry. This is problematic in that it makes the work more dangerous for its workers because the chemicals involved in this work are toxic and have short and long term effects on the people work with them. Workers are no more made aware of the toxins in the workplace than they are provided protective gear for working with them. Health and safety issues aren't a concern for most companies. Workers who attempt to better their unsafe working conditions or strengthen their benefits are usually blacklisted or fired for attempting to organize.(2) Unsafe working conditions coupled with substandard living conditions in a region where the explosive population has crushed the public services infrastructure is looking more like a set up for failure than success. Economic success is what the U.S. owned companies are hoping for with the implementation of the NAFTA agreement but if conditions aren't improved then the original concept of bringing business to México, cheap labor, will

evaporate as the labor force becomes extinct due to the nature of their work and the poor treatment they receive from their American bosses. The partners in the NAFTA treaty must address the sweatshop conditions that exist in their factories south of the border and move swiftly to turn things around.

Who are the workers? Women make up 60% of the maquila industry workers. Of these four in ten are under the age of 20.(3)Susana, a former maquila worker who was a contributor to this article, says women make up a large percentage of the work force because of the nature of the work. Women have smaller hands and thus a better facility for the intricate work sometimes involved in the assembly of electronic circuit boards for computers. In Ciudad Juarez there are today 340 factories employing more than 130,000 people. This number is shocking when compared to the 1970 statistic where there were only 22 factories employing 3,165 people.(4) Normally this growth, when examined from a capitalistic point of view would indicate positive economic growth for the surrounding community but in this border region the opposite is in play.. The infrastructure can't keep up with the growth. When we look at current statistics, 1994, and future projections for Ciudad Juarez, the living conditions are rapidly deteriorating. Currently, there are 1.5 million people living in Ciudad Juarez and not one water treatment plant.(5) By 1995 the population of the region including Las Cruces, New Mexico, El Paso, TX and Ciudad Juarez is expected to be at 2 million and by the year 2010, 3.3 million.(6) The home of two oil refineries, an ASARCO copper smelter and automobile emissions standards from the dark ages -- there are no restrictions and no way to put a lid on the environmental and social abuse. With increased intrastate commerce transportation liberties introduced in the NAFTA agreement, the traffic at the border has increased and so has the contamination in the air that the residents breathe. One resident

states: "you feel kind of sick everyday." Gas leaks, explosions, and the lack of emissions controls on cars and trucks are part of everyday life here.(7) This tainted environment can be directly blamed on the maquila industry, U.S. owned companies, and the governments on both sides of the border who have ignored the health and well being of the workers and residents of cities who share the air with the belching, coughing maquila plants.

"In Juarez, the workers, most of them young women, leave their homes at six in the morning to go to work. The best of these homes are three or four rooms made of concrete block and adobe; the worst are one of two rooms made of discarded lumber and tar paper. Many have no running water or toilets. The workers walk unpaved side streets which, depending on the season, are dusty, muddy or occasionally snowy, to wait for the city bus or company van to pick them up and carry them to work." (8) "I rode the bus for one and a half hours each way," relates Susana (not her real name)a mother of one of my students and a former maquiladora employee in Ciudad Juarez. In much of the reading and sources I consulted many of the women interviewed claimed that the plant where they worked was very clean and attractive compared to where they lived. When I read that hazardous wastes from companies were being 'clandestinely dumped into the sewage.'(9) I realized that cities who play host to these giant companies and their plants play a dangerous game.

Primary Source: I met Carlos,name changed, a recent immigrant from México, at Newcomer High School in San Francisco where he was a student in my ESL class. He had been a student in my homeroom last semester so I knew that he was from Ciudad Juarez. In talking with him this fall after returning from México, I told him about my research and suggested that we talk sometime about the border region. Telling him more about the nature

of my studies, maquiladoras, he thought it would be helpful if I spoke to his mother Susana,name changed, a former maquila employee. I had no idea that I would get such access to a primary source because our summer Fulbright program didn't allow for much discovery outside of the scheduled lectures and events. We drove through Juarez one afternoon but I can't say that much about the city or its residents.

Carlos' mother Susana is a very articulate, positive and upbeat woman. It has been a pleasure getting to know her. She paints a picture of a difficult life for maquila workers who were young women -- many were single mothers. Confirming what I'd read, she talks of tough working conditions and little pay that warrants finding ways to supplement your income a necessary step in surviving. She says she took in laundry for extra money and said Carlos, then 7 years old, offered to sell gum to passing commuters. In this article I have integrated her comments and information in order to help support and authenticate my study with first hand information. In a more complete study more workers would be interviewed so that their answers could be statistically analyzed and formatted. Susana is in no way meant to represent the gospel truth. Some of her written answers to my questions seemed to carry a more guarded or conservative tone whereas her spoken words were fighting ones. Her need to protect her identity was a prime motivator in being more reserved in answering.

Having access to a primary source like Susana has been the cornerstone of this article. There are difficulties involved in doing in depth studies about the maquila workers because access is blocked. Plant owners are reluctant to participate because it could harm business and the Mexican government is dependent on the maquila industry for economic stability.(10)

"All along the border they solder, glue, dip and wash parts in hundreds of liquids and

chemicals with long, complicated names and dangerous side effects. They put up with skin rashes, burning eyes and sore throats. They work long hours without gloves, masks or in many cases proper ventilation." (11) In another account a young woman employee at W.R. Grace Corp. describes the bad air and how the women workers there frequently faint from fumes.(12) At Vinil Tec de México (owned by Vinil Tech of El Monte, CA)machines "hot-red-hot" would rip your skin off your fingers.(13) The list of chemicals that are still used in maquiladoras is frightening. Chemicals like benzene, lead and zinc are those known to cause reproductive problems are widely used(14). "The maquilas are extremely dangerous because they can kill people and it won't cause them a thing. Industry in the modern world has been obliged to raise its safety standards for fear of being sued for neglecting health and safety -- that doesn't exist here.(17) Susana confirms much of this but looks at it as a matter of survival. As a divorced woman with four small children and no financial support from her former husband she was desperate. She relates that many of her co-workers in an electronics assembly plant were also young single mothers who felt lucky to have steady work. When the alternative is not eating and not paying the rent people take a lot of risks,especially when they aren't always clear about what they are working with. Susana says she remembers odors all the time but she never questioned the fact that she wasn't provided a mask or that the room was always hot and stuffy. She states further that workers aren't inserviced about which chemicals thry work with or given equipment to help guard against the physical effects of such work.

In reporting about salary and benefits Susans says the salaries in México are set by the government and in those years, early to mid 1980s, her salary was $35 per week as an assembly worker in an electronics plant in Ciudad Juarez. She worked from 6:30 a.m. until

2:30 p m daily not including her hour and a half each way bus ride to and from work. She said because she needed the extra money she would often work 2:30 - 6:30 p.m. but for this overtime she wasn't paid extra like time and a half. Sometimes she said workers would get bonuses which were paid in food coupons to be redeemed at the local grocery store. She said many women with children in middle or high school would also work the extra hours. The reason is because after grade six, books and supplies are no longer provided by the government and instead parents are made to pay. Susana says many parents, especially single mothers, can't afford the high cost of textbooks and materials for their elder children so they leave school and spend their days in the streets.

As for sick leave and vacation benefits, she spoke of a sick leave policy that seems almost punitive. One time she was sick for five days and her company paid only for the last two days of her illness of which they only paid 60%. Demands by management for high production rates dictate the fast paced working atmosphere in the maquilas where Susana says the politics are all the same. Workers, even if ill, come in and work and are discouraged from leaving work even if they feel so sick they are unable to work. Every plant has an IMSS, Mexican Social Security System, health worker on staff but employees are discouraged from taking time away from production to seek assistance.

When I discussed how maquila workers like Susana work without asking too many questions, I wonder if it's because they know they don't have a forum for registering complaints or bargaining for change. "If Mexicans voice any protest about these conditions, they risk losing their jobs."(16) Unions are almost non-existent in the U.S. owned companies in Mexico (state controlled unions). There are some references to organized labor or that the government provides this service but by and large I think workers are afraid of putting their

jobs in jeopardy so they don't complain or ask for more benefits.

"In April 1993, workers at the BESA plant in Juarez petitioned for the right to form a "coalition" which under Mexican labor law would give them the right to bargain with their employers. All 113 workers who signed the petition were immediately fired, the employer preferring to pay them their severance rather than have a union in the plant." (17) Susana confirmed the anti-labor sentiment for me but she didn't realize it. I asked her if workers wanted to form a union or organize for better working conditions then how would they go about it? She said there really wasn't a need for this because every plant has a "Sindicato" who represents worker grievances to management. This was the avenue she knew of complaints and she seemed to be content with not discussing the union issue further. The control by management that this scenario represents is frightening. They don't have good benefits, salary raises, grievance procedure, safety etc. because they know the average maquila worker is like Susana -- a single mother whose livelihood is dependent on her keeping her job at the plant. What's even more frightening is that these aren't Mexican owned companies. These companies have names like General Electric, Honeywell, AT&T, Toshiba, Sony, Ford, General Motors.

Does the NAFTA signing bring a silver lining to this black cloud? Can the three governments include stronger controls on, for example,protecting workers from working around deadly chemicals or allowing, even encouraging, union organization. In terms of labor there's a ray of hope in the forming of the "National Administrative Office" a labor oversight group formed by the Clinton administration under the NAFTA agreement. However, in respect to Mexican operations, the office hasn't offered any encouragement. In an October 14, 1994 Wall Street Journal article (18) the Teamsters Union alleges that General

Electric and Honeywell workers in Mexican maquilas aren't being protected as they try to organize. Complainants reported that Honeywell terminated 20 production workers at its Chihuahua plant for trying to organize and that General Electric "retaliated" against those employees trying to organize at a GE plant in Ciudad Juarez. This office said that the complaint was void because the Mexican government via their state controlled unions protected workers' rights. The "Sindicato" maybe. It's hard not to be synical but the idea that these are U.S. companies and they can behave differently once they cross that border really bothers me. If workers at the General Electric Plant in Little Rock, Arkansas or Denver, Colorado wanted to organize against management they could and they would. In Mexico the system has a long way to go. In terms of this agency,"National Administrative Office,"set up in the NAFTA agreement, it can "impose sanctions on Mexico or Canada for failing to enforce minimum wage, child labor and occupational-safety laws. But the office can't punish them for failing to act on industrial-relations issues such as the right to organize."(19) What a loop hole! This leaves much room for continued control and repression of the inexpensive labor force available U.S. companies.

For maquila workers who are economically dependent on their jobs I don't forecast much change in their situation and I'm overwhelmed with sadness for them and their families because I know the solution lies in part with the U.S. government. I'm embarrassed for the way the workers are denied due process. The border's problems are escalating as its fast growing population has, over the past 25 years, crushed the existing infrastructure where public services are almost non existent and polluted skies and water are the rule. People who come to the United States are lucky to escape the maquilas where safety and the right to negotiate aren't practices yet in place. Reform must come with NAFTA or the entire premise

of building stronger future relationships, economic and social, is a farce. It's just another giant step forward for American business and another giant step backward for Mexican laborers, especially if health and safety practices continue unchecked. I wait for the day when Mexican workers walk out of work situations that they find unsafe or unrewarding. And that they aren't afraid to organize and bargain for their rights. I wait for the day when the water in the river isn't polluted with hazardous waste dumped by American companies.

Notes

1. Augusta Dwyer. On The Line: Life On The U.S.-Mexican Border (London, 1994), 6-7

2. Ibid, 67

3. Ibid, 25

4. Ibid, 17

5. Ibid, 21

6. Frank H. Crespin, MD,'Overview of Border Health Issues,'*Border Health Journal* (April-June,1994)

7. Augusta Dwyer. On The Line: Life On The U.S.-Mexican Border (London, 1994), 49

8. Daniel La Botz.'Manufacturing Poverty: The Maquiladorization Of Mexico, International Journal of Health Services, Vol. 24

9. Herbert H. Ortega. 'Evaluation Of The Implications Of The Impact Of Hazardous Waste From The Maquiladora Industry In The U.S./Mexico Border,' *Border Health Journal,(April-June, 1994)*

10. Melbourne Hovell. 'Occupational Health Risks For Mexican Women: The Case Of The Maquiladora Along The Mexican-United States Border' *International Journal of Health Services*, Vol 18, No. 4, 1988

11. Augusta Dwyer. On The Line: Life On The U.S.-Mexican Border (London, 1994), 75

12. Ibid, 14

13. Ibid, 75

14. La Botz, 406

15. Augusta Dwyer. On The Line: Life On The U.S.-Mexican Border (London, 1994), 24

16. Ibid, p. 66

17. La Botz, 403

18. Asra Q. Nomani.'Unions Angry After Administration Rejects Complaints About Mexico Plants,' Wall Street Journal, October 14, 1994

19. Ibid

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